

HESITATION AND TURN-TAKING IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE

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Received: 12.12.2025

Revised: 13.12.2025

Accepted: 14.12.2025

KALIT SO'ZLAR:

hesitation; turn-taking; spoken discourse; conversation analysis; pauses; fillers; discourse management

ANNOTATSIYA:

This article examines the linguistic phenomena of hesitation and turn-taking as fundamental components of spoken interaction. Hesitation, manifested through pauses, filled pauses, repetitions, and self-repairs, has traditionally been interpreted as a sign of cognitive difficulty. However, contemporary research demonstrates that hesitation also performs significant interactional and pragmatic functions, signaling speakers' intentions and shaping conversational flow. Turn-taking, meanwhile, governs the organization of speaker transitions and ensures the orderly progression of dialogue. Drawing on Conversation Analysis and psycholinguistic research, the article explores how hesitation interacts with the mechanisms of turn-taking, influencing the allocation of turns and contributing to the negotiation of conversational rights. The interrelationship between these phenomena reveals the complexity of real-time speech production and highlights the dynamic nature of human communication.

Hesitation and turn-taking are two central mechanisms that shape the structure and interpretation of spoken discourse. Unlike written language, speech is produced and processed in real time, requiring speakers to plan their utterances, monitor their performance, and adjust their contributions as the interaction unfolds. Because of this immediacy, spoken discourse includes features such as pauses, fillers, repetitions, and self-repairs. At the same time, smooth interaction depends on an underlying system of turn-taking, which regulates when speakers begin and end their contributions. These two phenomena interact closely, revealing both cognitive processes and social norms involved in communication. Hesitation is one of the most prominent features of spontaneous speech. It refers to any interruption or delay in the smooth progression of an utterance. Linguists identify several forms of hesitation, including silent pauses, filled pauses such as “uh” and “um,” prolonged sounds, and self-repairs in which speakers correct or modify their speech as they produce it. Although such features were once viewed as signs of poor fluency or lack of linguistic competence, research over the past several decades has emphasized their communicative value. According to Levelt’s model of speech production, hesitation reflects moments of increased cognitive effort during conceptualization or lexical retrieval.[2] When speakers search for words or plan complex syntactic structures, temporary interruptions in speech serve as markers of this cognitive activity.

However, hesitation is not solely a cognitive phenomenon. It also performs essential interactional functions. Conversational partners do not simply speak one after another; they continuously interpret one another’s pauses, fillers, and intonation patterns to gauge intentions and anticipate turn structure. Clark and Tree argue that filled pauses are deliberate communicative signals that inform listeners of upcoming delays.[5] In this sense, hesitation can help speakers maintain the conversational floor while planning their next utterance, preventing others from entering at a point where a transition might otherwise be possible. Thus, hesitation plays a role in managing conversational rights and maintaining coherence in interaction.

Turn-taking, the second major phenomenon discussed in this article, refers to the organized system through which speakers alternate between speaking and listening roles. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson’s foundational work in Conversation Analysis demonstrated that turn-taking is not random but follows systematic principles that minimize overlap and silence.[3] They introduced the concept of turn-construction units (TCUs), which are linguistic units such as clauses or sentences that may constitute complete

conversational turns. At the end of each TCU, a transition relevance place (TRP) arises, where speaker change may occur. Participants rely on syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic cues to identify these moments and coordinate their contributions. The interaction between hesitation and turn-taking becomes especially visible at these transition relevance places. When a speaker hesitates before completing a TCU, the hesitation may signal a desire to continue speaking. A filled pause such as “um,” placed just before a potential turn boundary, indicates that the speaker has not yet finished their contribution, thereby discouraging others from taking the floor. Conversely, prolonged silence after a potentially complete TCU may invite another participant to begin their turn. In this way, hesitation can actively influence the allocation of turns, either delaying or facilitating speaker transitions.

Hesitation also plays an important role in situations where turn competition arises. In conversations where participants speak rapidly or enthusiastically, overlapping speech is relatively common. A speaker who hesitates excessively at a turn boundary risks losing the floor to another participant. On the other hand, well-timed hesitation markers can help a speaker hold the floor even when they need additional time to plan their utterance. These interactions reveal the subtle negotiation of conversational rights and the strategic use of hesitation in maintaining or yielding control. Cultural and linguistic norms further shape how hesitation and turn-taking are interpreted. Some cultures prefer rapid transitions between speakers, while others value longer pauses as signs of reflection or politeness. Languages also differ in their typical hesitation markers, such as “eeto” in Japanese, “ee” in Russian, or “aa” in Uzbek. The interpretation of hesitation therefore depends not only on cognitive and universal factors but also on cultural expectations and communicative conventions. Misinterpretations may arise in intercultural communication when speakers rely on differing norms regarding pause length or transition timing.

Understanding hesitation and turn-taking has important implications for applied linguistics, language teaching, and communication studies. Language learners often avoid hesitation markers because they fear sounding incompetent, yet native speakers use them frequently and strategically. Teaching learners to use fillers, pauses, and self-repairs appropriately can enhance their communicative naturalness and confidence. Additionally, awareness of cross-cultural variation in turn-taking can prevent misunderstandings in intercultural interactions. In the field of discourse analysis, the study of hesitation provides insights into cognitive processes and conversational structure, while turn-taking analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of interactional organization.

In conclusion, hesitation and turn-taking are essential features of spoken discourse that reflect the complexity of real-time communication. Hesitation functions not only as a cognitive indicator of speech planning but also as an interactional resource that helps speakers manage turns, signal intentions, and negotiate conversational rights. Turn-taking, meanwhile, provides a structural framework for orderly communication. The interplay between these two phenomena highlights the dynamic and co-constructed nature of human interaction and underscores the need for continued research in both areas to deepen our understanding of spontaneous speech.

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